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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0794  
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
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SUBJECT: RULING PARTY SHOWS SACKED MINISTER NO MERCY

¶1. (SBU) Prime Minister Berisha on March 4 fired Minister of Culture, Youth, Sports and Tourism Ylli Pango less than one hour after a TV program broadcast video from a hidden camera showing Pango requesting sexual favors from a job applicant at Pango's Ministry. Pango's sacking marked a quick and ignominious end to years of rumored sexual misconduct on the part of Pango, first as a professor and then as Minister of Culture. During a March 5 session of Parliament, Speaker Jozephina Topalli urged the Parliament to strip Pango of his immunity and expel him from Parliament. Media coverage, including the pro-government press, has excoriated Pango's outrageous personal behavior and blatant abuse of office. Pango, for his part, has struck a defiant tone, claiming during a live TV interview that the hidden camera video shown on TV had been taken out of context, and that the "provocative dress" of the young woman job seeker "would have tempted anyone."

¶2. (SBU) COMMENT: With one sitting minister (FM Basha) about to go on trial for abuse of office and a former minister under indictment (former DefMin Mediu), Prime Minister Berisha and Speaker Topalli cannot afford another scandal involving a minister in the run-up to the June parliamentary elections. Their ferocious response to the TV expose reveals the degree to which Pango was disliked in many circles, but also Berisha's election-year sensitivity to avoid yet another scandal involving a high government official. The PM hopes that his instant response on this occasion will prevent a bleeding wound from hemorrhaging.

¶3. (SBU) COMMENT CONT'D: The reaction today in Tirana is largely one of "he got what he deserved," as Pango has been a notorious figure for years, first for extorting sexual favors from students when he was a professor, then from job applicants and others during his tenure as Minister of Culture. But a larger, more important change may also be taking place: it is increasingly evident that Albanians in the media and the judiciary, as well as society at large, are becoming less tolerant of misbehavior and corruption on the part of government officials, with Pango becoming the third minister in less than a year to become ensnared in a high-profile scandal and investigation. Just two years ago, the prosecution and downfall of even a deputy minister was big news. Now it seems all too common.

WITHERS